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## **Book Review: Deanna Smid, *The Imagination in Early Modern English Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2017)**

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Deanna Smid, *The Imagination in Early Modern English Literature* (Leiden, Brill, 2017), 210 pp, ISBN 978-90-0434403-7

**Reviewed by:** Claude Fretz, Queen's University Belfast

In modern English usage, when we describe someone as 'imaginative', or say that they have a lot of 'imagination', we refer to their ability to create or to be creative – and often, the connotations are positive. Our understanding of the imagination, therefore, is recognisably post-Romantic. One of Coleridge's lasting legacies is his definition of the 'imagination' in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817), where he contrasts it with the lesser 'fancy'; to Coleridge, the imagination 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealise and to unify' (*Biographia Literaria*). In the Renaissance, however, the imagination was something entirely different, and it was a lot less 'Romantic'; the early modern imagination, in fact, was a faculty and an organ that humans shared with animals. In the light of these differences, the early modern imagination is certainly a worthwhile subject of investigation – one which Deanna Smid undertakes to tackle in her book *The Imagination in Early Modern English Literature*.

Smid's book, which originates from her PhD research, uses historicist methods to investigate how, 'in poetry, drama, and fictional narratives, authors self-consciously employ and test the characteristics of imagination philosophers, physicians, and theologians were earnestly debating' (8). The stated focus on literary texts which, Smid claims, 'are not usually considered part of the "canon"' (12), sets this book apart from the dizzying number of recent

publications on embodiment, body-mind relationships, imagination, cognition, and the senses, for example. While Smid's claim that she is investigating non-canonical literature is slightly perplexing in the light of her extensive discussion of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (chapter 3) – a play whose concern with the imagination is, in any case, well known – her selection of texts is generally rich and varied, and covers a range of genres: Thomas Nashe's prose fiction *The Unfortunate Traveller* (chapter 2), Richard Brome's comedy *The Antipodes* (chapter 4), and Francis Quarles's emblem book, entitled *Emblemes* (chapter 5).

As one would expect, Smid's book extensively discusses how the imagination was understood in early modern times, and it starts with a substantial opening chapter that does just that. Smid's book builds on solid research and draws on an admirably wide range of early modern treatises including Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholy* (1586), Thomas Wright's *The Passions of the Mind in General* (1604), Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), and Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), to name but a few. While readers interested in the literary uses and representations of the imagination will need to exert a degree of patience before their interests are catered to – the first chapter does not yet turn to early modern literature, and Smid's discussion in general is at times overburdened with quotations and detailed, but sometimes repetitive, close readings of various treatises – the upside to this is that the book becomes attractive to readers interested more broadly in intellectual history. Smid talks knowledgeably about the role of the imagination in sensory perception, and she is aware of the crucial interactions between material and immaterial (or spiritual) forms of perception and cognition in early modern thought. In that regard, she does not limit herself to the bodily dimensions of the imagination, but also takes into account early modern thinking that linked the imagination to divine inspiration, and explores, in her fifth and final chapter, the question of how the imagination can be 'devotional' (149). Smid's final chapter stands apart also because, by

focusing on Francis Quarles's emblem book, it turns to a genre quite different from the ones discussed in previous chapters. Since an emblem book combines text and image, it is, perhaps, the most interesting of the genres that Smid investigates, not only because it is politically charged in the post-Reformation context, but also because, as she rightly notes, 'emblems ... pertain particularly to the imagination because they deliberately appeal to many senses and they demand the conjuncture of sensory data in order to create meaning' (166). It is a shame, in that regard, that Smid's monograph does not contain any illustrations of relevant emblems from Quarles's book, as this could have enriched her discussion considerably.

The rationale behind Smid's chapters, apart from the opening one, thus seems to be to discuss one specific aspect of the imagination and to examine how it is approached in one literary text of the period. As a corollary of that undertaking, though, it is necessary for her to introduce yet more background material on early modern natural philosophy at the beginning of each of these chapters, because the introductory chapter only discusses the imagination in general terms. Smid does not always get this balance right; chapter two, for example, which deals with the 'imagination embodied', devotes only seventeen pages to Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller*. Indeed, in the light of Smid's stated intent to discuss the imagination in early modern literature, certain parts of her book, even though they are admirably well researched, give surprisingly little attention to the focal literary texts and instead feel like a close reading of treatises. That does not mean, however, that the contextual material is not interesting; Smid, in fact, offers fascinating insights into some of the potentially darker aspects of the imagination, for example when she discusses the imagination as a 'sinful faculty' able to corrupt the understanding (26-7), or when she examines the 'persuasive or contagious effect' of the imagination (55) and demonstrates how a person's imagination was thought not just to affect one's own body, but also the bodies and minds of

others. This ability of the imagination to affect the body, Smid argues, is illustrated in Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller*, where the various travels and experiences of the protagonist Wilton progressively train his imagination to become active, to express itself, and 'to impact the body and mind, translating sensory data into personal response' (78). Equally fascinating is Smid's account of the 'imagination gendered' (chapter 3), in which she shows, for example, that women's 'soft' and 'tender' brains (80) were not only malleable and exceptionally receptive to the impressions of the imagination, but could also, if the woman was pregnant, form and shape the child that she was carrying.

A very interesting aspect of Smid's monograph – and one of its real strengths – revolves around her observation, in almost each of the chapters of literary analysis, that literature can paint an image of the imagination quite different from the one provided by the theoretical treatises of the period. Smid thus demonstrates, for example, that Nashe's *Unfortunate Traveller* presents the imagination's impact on the body as the 'product of nurture', whereas early modern theorists see this as an innate process (78); and she reveals that Margaret Cavendish, unlike the majority of early modern writers who called for the sinful and dangerous imagination to be controlled and restrained through the faculties of reason and common sense, 'advocates imagination's liberty almost without reservation' (123). Smid's research here is a valuable addition to discussions of the often readily assumed importance of moderation, restraint, and control in early modern humoral and physiological discourses, which Cavendish's opinions seem to problematise, at least with regard to the imagination. 'Give me life' (*1 Henry IV*, 5.3.58), famously says Shakespeare's Falstaff, who very much embodies the idea of immoderation. Perhaps, the tenet of moderation and restraint, which we often take for granted, is not at all a panacea for understanding early modern life.

Smid's *The Imagination in Early Modern English Literature* is thus a rich interdisciplinary contribution not just to English literary studies, but also to the history of

ideas more broadly; and it will interest academics as well as graduate and research students working in these fields and in cognate disciplines. Even though Smid's decision to focus on just one literary text per chapter can seem limiting, her book offers valuable insights into the early modern intellectual climate and shows how this informed the portrayal of the imagination in mostly non-canonical texts of various genres – but that, importantly, these authors of early modern literature were, characteristically, by no means in thrall to the teachings of their more scientifically-minded contemporaries.